By Wesley Young
JOURNAL REPORTER

In 1963, Smith Reynolds Airport had 130,000 takeoffs and landings, making it the busiest airport in the state and ranking it No. 85 in the country. Those days are long gone.

It's been almost 40 years since regularly scheduled passenger service stopped at Smith Reynolds.

Last month, Smith Reynolds lost its director, Larry Scalfini. Although they wouldn't discuss specifics about Scalfini's departure, airport officials said they wanted a leader who could bring a fresh approach to promoting the airport as an economic asset.

About the same time, subcontractors on a federally financed runway project began complaining that they hadn't been paid by the prime contractor, Mainline, a Durham company.

Then Pace Airlines suspended operations on Sept. 17. William Rodgers Sr., the owner of Pace, was arrested Tuesday and charged with failing to pay employees.

Pace still owes the airport about $900,000 in owed fees.

On the upside, officials say the airport keeps a healthy reserve — currently estimated at $1.7 million — and is financially self-supporting.

Dudley Humphrey, a former member of the airport commission, put it even more bluntly.

"I think that Winston-Salem had totally unrealistic expectations of maintaining a scheduled air carrier service," Humphrey said. "That just didn't make sense."

History of the airport

In 1927, the airport got off to an auspicious start.

Winston-Salem learned that its new airport was a mere shadow of its former self. The city had high hopes for the airport, but it never really became an air-carrier airport again," Humphrey said. "That would be nice, but that is not realistic."

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would stop here during a cross-country trip to promote aviation.

Local leaders responded by creating a new airport to replace a landing field in the Sedge Garden area, and named it Miller Municipal Airport in honor of Clint Miller, a local man who donated $17,000 to the effort.

Lindbergh came and told civic leaders that they needed to be in the forefront of aviation.

They took his advice.

In 1940, Dick Reynolds, the son of R.L. Reynolds, and his sister donated $645,000 for airport improvements.

That money paid for the building of the terminal and led to the renaming of the airport for Z. Smith Reynolds, the younger son of R.L. Reynolds, who had died in 1933.

Z. Smith Reynolds was an avid aviator. When he was 20, he flew solo from London to Hong Kong.

After serving as a military training base in World War II, the airport became the home of Piedmont Airlines and business boomed.

Piedmont evolved from a "pigeon-jumper" to a major air carrier.

But by the time Piedmont merged with USAir in 1989, Smith Reynolds Airport had long been bypassed by Greensboro as the Triad's destination airport.

Passenger boardings at Smith Reynolds dropped from 33,000 in 1980 to 2,711 in 1984.

The number of boardings rebounded somewhat, the airport served about 8,000 passengers in 1985 before passenger service was stopped in early 2000.

Planes still fly in and out for maintenance and repair. The airport has a flight school and aircraft sales. People fly private planes and corporate jets out of the airport.

The airport has about 40,000 takeoffs and landings each year.

Landmark Aviation, the airport's largest tenant since Pace suspended operations, sells jet fuel and repairs and sells planes.

"The lights aren't going to be dimmed anytime soon," McKinnon said. "The airport is a terrific asset to the community. The long-term prospects are quite bright."

Emerging 'aeropolis'?

What is realistic, airport officials and others say, is to think of Smith Reynolds Airport as part of what people are calling the emerging "aeropolis" of the Piedmont Triad.

That's the conclusion drawn by John Kasarda, an expert on aviation at UNC-Chapel Hill and the author of reports in 2007 and 2008 outlining the aeropolis concept.

An aeropolis, Kasarda says, includes distribution centers and business and technology parks. Kasarda said that Smith Reynolds, with its proximity to downtown and Wake Forest University, could become a growth center for businesses that need highly educated labor, air access and urban amenities.

But area business recruiters point out that the presence of an airport such as Smith Reynolds is rarely a deal maker when it comes to a company's relocation decision.

"A few companies a year may inquire about the airport as they look for a business site," said Bob Leah Jr., the president of Winston-Salem Business Inc., an organization that promotes development in the city and Forsyth County.

"Rarely does that drive the deal," Leah said. "They look at labor, facilities and access to the market. Then all that is available, a nice thing to have is an airport."

Leah's not bad-mouthing the airport, though. He said that it is one of the few general aviation airports that has a continuously manned tower and is one of the finest general aviation airports in the country.

A general aviation airport is one that doesn't have regular passenger service.

Leah said that his organization is "bullish on the airport," even though there's that nagging problem of available land.

"When you have a company that needs a large footprint there is yet that opportunity."

Looking for new ideas

It's legitimate to ask whether the Winston-Salem area needs to invest in an airport, if the aeropolis focuses on PTI as the engine of the area's economy, said Don Kirkman, the president and chief executive officer of the Piedmont Triad Partnership.

"In terms of our primary passenger terminal in the Piedmont Triad there is no question that PTI is that airport," Kirkman said.

"We need to take that into account and embrace that. We have a number of other airports that have excellent facilities, and they are all trying to maximize the economic return."

Kirkman said that it's great that the airport commission in Forsyth is embarking on a strategic analysis to guide the airport's future direction.

McKinnon serves on the aeropolis leadership board and will be an effective voice for Smith Reynolds, Kirkman said.

County commissioner Ted Kaplan, the county's representative on the airport commission, said he sees opportunities amid the current struggles. Kaplan said that the airport is in the process of developing a job description for a new director, but doesn't have a specific timetable for getting that done or hiring someone.

"That building that Pace occupied is a unique facility in the airline industry," Kaplan said. "You can put three Boeing 737s in there and do maintenance work. Anyone with a fleet of them will be looking for a place to have maintenance done on those planes."

Kaplan said that it is important for people to realize that the airport is self-supporting. Although the county owns the airport land, the airport requires no county subsidy for its operations.

The airport has nine employees.

The city has invested in a business park near but not at the airport. McKinnon said that airport officials are aware of the need to make more land available. That need, or others, may emerge from the airport's planning process.

"We are interested in identifying new ideas," McKinnon said. "Part of that is going to be the aeropolis, but I don't want to overstate that, because primarily our destiny lies in our own hands."

Smith Reynolds Airport was once the home of Piedmont Airlines, which merged with USAir in 1989.